

Landlord Technologies of Gentrification: Facial Recognition and Building Access Technologies in New York City Homes

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This report examines the companies, geographies, and policies related to new building access and facial recognition systems that landlords are deploying in New York City homes.

Introduction

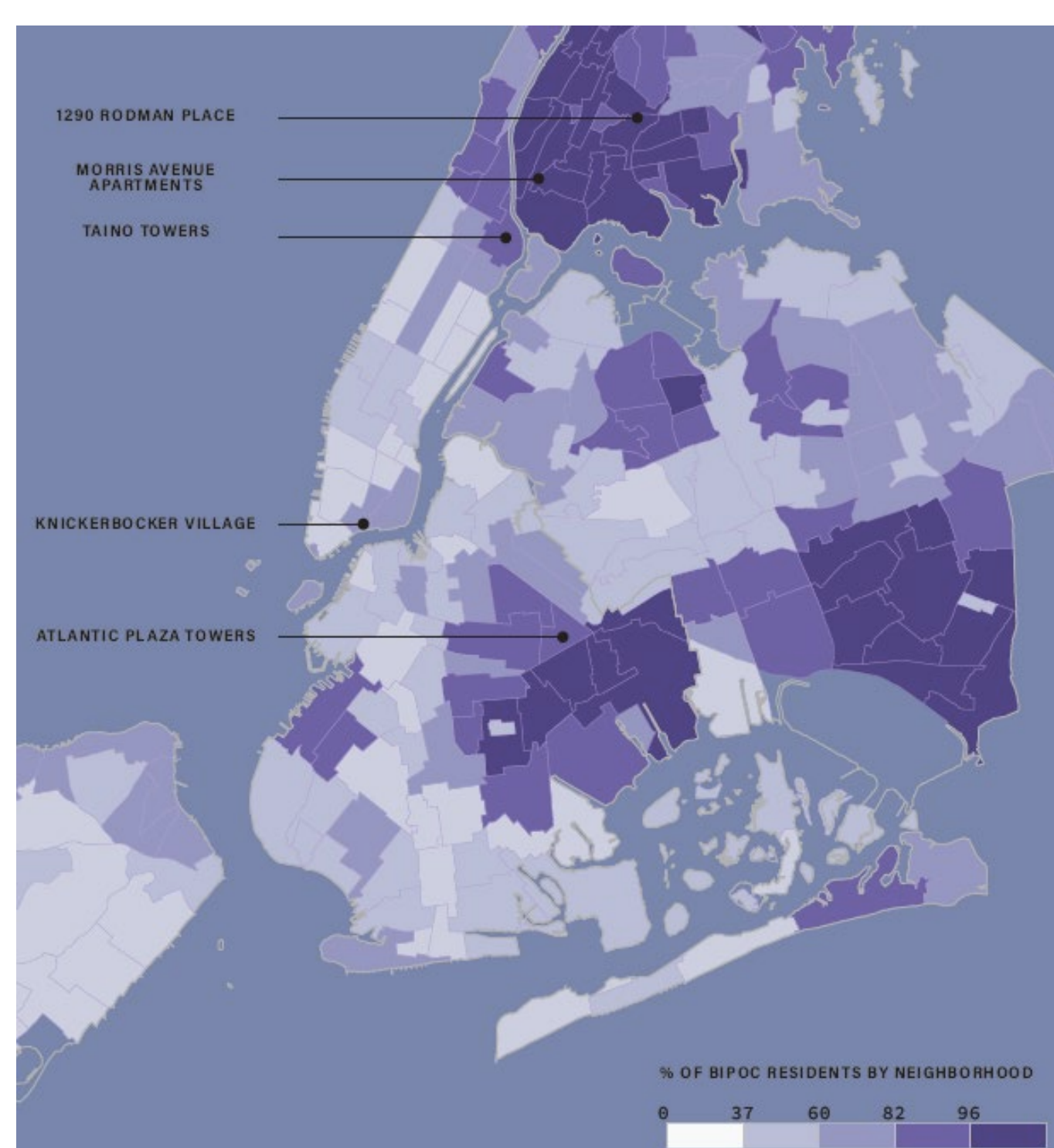
This report examines the increasing deployment of landlord technologies in New York City (NYC) housing, and the problems this creates and intensifies. These technologies include facial recognition, closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras, and other algorithmic, biometric, and app-based building access technologies specifically designed to be deployed in tenant housing and surrounding public and private space. We map the genealogies and geographies of these surveillance systems, looking at intersections of surveillance, carcerality, and gentrification. In addition, we look at why it is that NYC has become an epicenter of what the real estate industry describes as the “property technology,” or the “proptech” industry. This term encompasses the platforms, systems, algorithms, and data regimes connecting the real estate and technology industries in residential, commercial, and industrial buildings.

Research Goal

By naming specific companies, systems, and geographies, we hope this information will be helpful for tenants interested in researching and organizing against harmful landlord tech in their homes and communities.

Racial Geographies

We look at examples of landlord tech building access surveillance being rolled out without tenant consent in several large low-income and affordable housing complexes, such as Atlantic Plaza Towers, Taino Towers, Knickerbocker Village, and Morris Avenue Apartments in primarily non-white neighborhoods.



Project Overview

Landlord Technologies of Gentrification:

Facial Recognition and Building Access Technologies in New York City Homes

“With gentrification phasing out the diversity in neighborhoods, these technologies will be used as surveillance tactics to essentially speed up that process”

—Fabian Rogers, Atlantic Plaza Tower Tenant



“We as residents do not want to feel as if though we are prisoners, tagged and monitored as soon as we make a move . . . We have been continuously treated like criminals in our own homes.”

—Taslym Francis, Atlantic Plaza Tower Tenant

This report focuses on the geographies, harms, and histories of surveillance-based landlord tech in NYC housing. We begin by exploring how and why NYC emerged as a hub of landlord technology throughout the latter half of the 20th century, and how it has been augmented through various crises into the Covid-19 present. We then contextualize how landlord tech automates processes of gentrification and racial dispossession. By mapping rezoning histories and geographies in the city, we find that new facial recognition landlord tech systems are often deployed along rezoning borders. They can be interpreted as strategic tools to augment property value by “catching” tenants for petty lease violations and raising rents. We begin by outlining the history of CCTV cameras, particularly as it has been deployed in public and low-income housing. We draw upon tenant testimonies from public hearings and press conferences to elaborate on the carceral effects of forced home surveillance, looking to stories of how landlord tech (e.g., facial recognition, algorithmic, and robotic systems) transforms the home into a prison-like space.

FACIAL RECOGNITION DEPLOYMENT IN AFFORDABLE HOUSING COMPLEXES

Public and low-income housing in gentrifying neighborhoods as testing grounds for facial recognition
Sources: Data for the map and timeline was compiled through a combination of public tenant testimonies, insights from legal advocates, and media articles.

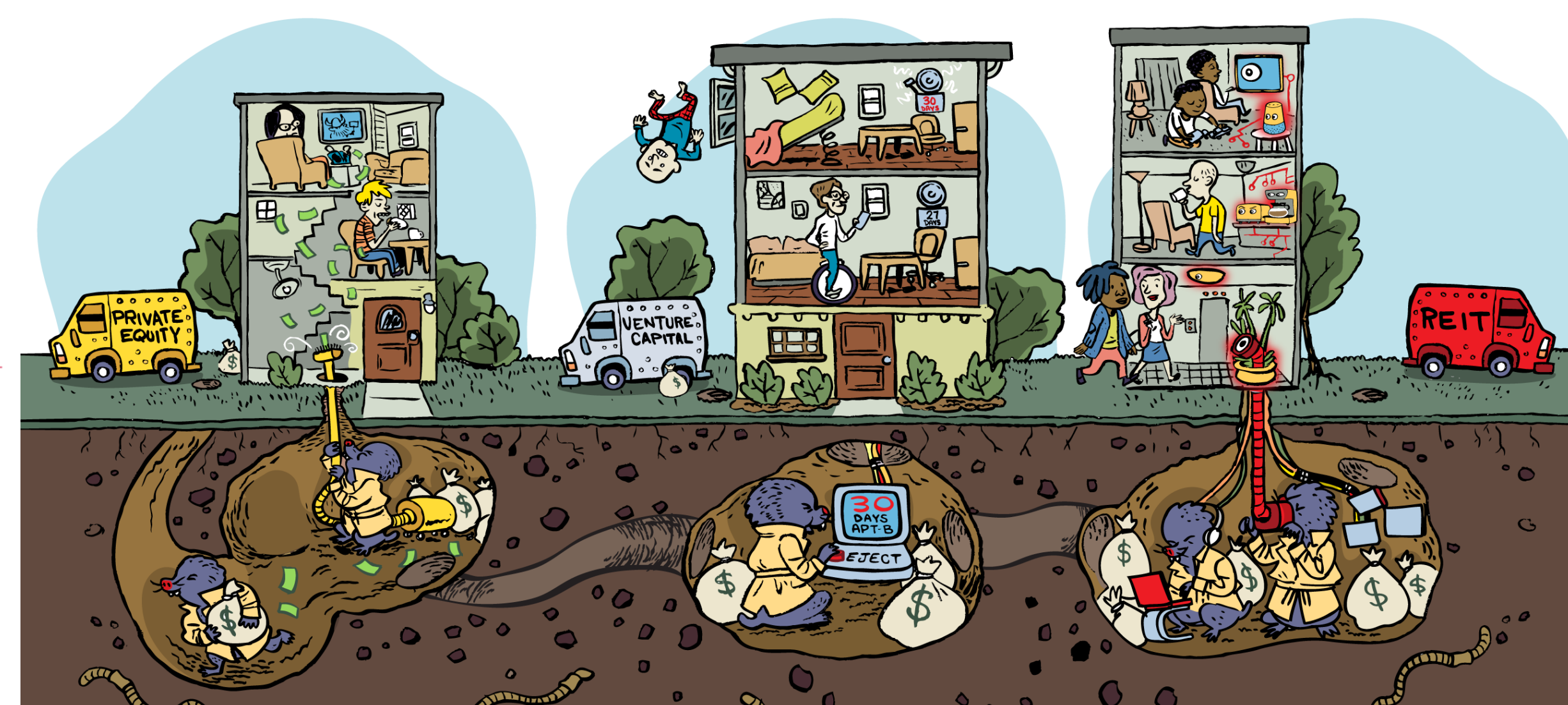
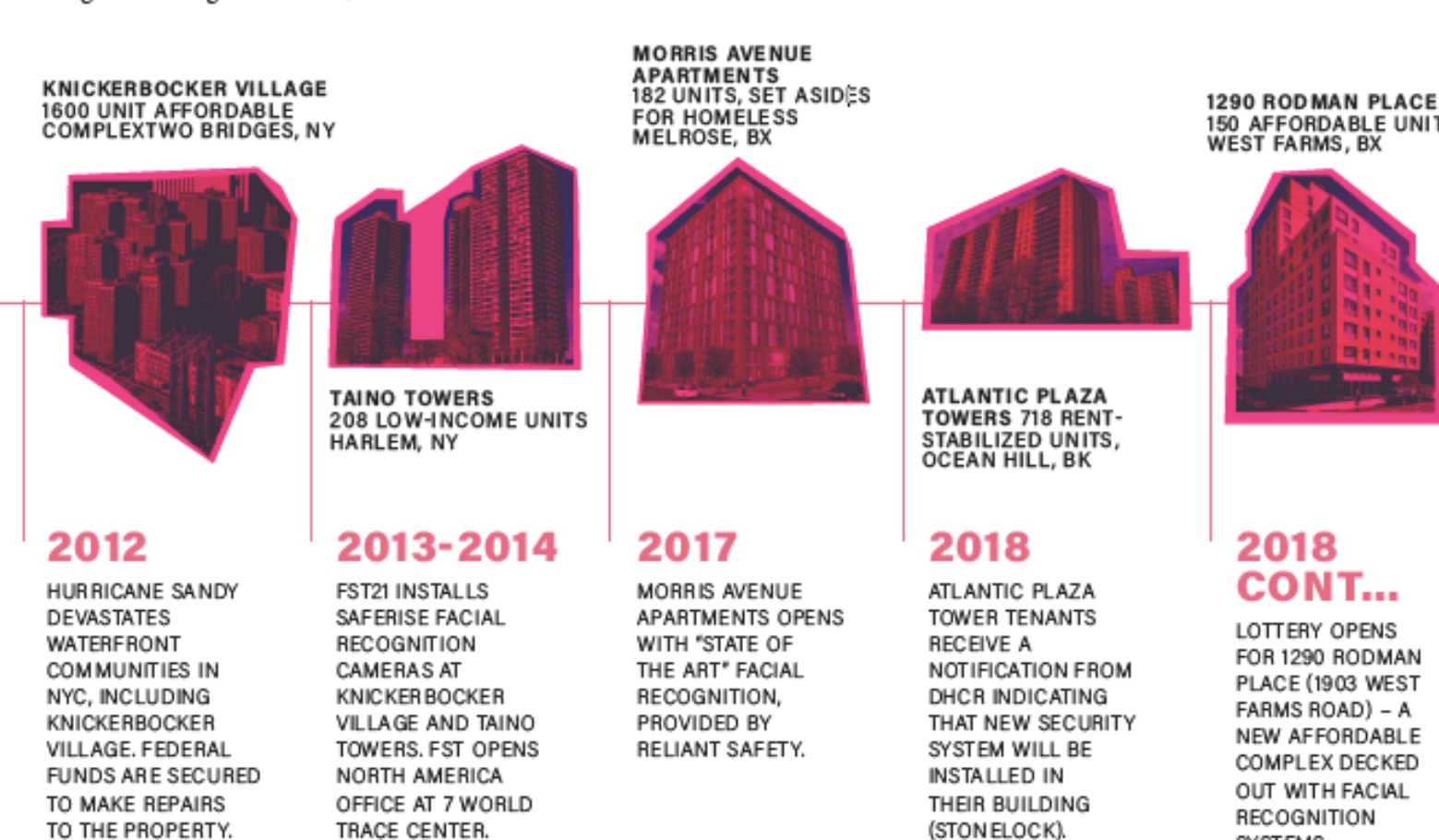


Illustration by Frederick Noland / [people. power. media]

Policy and Action



In the report, we offer a policy summary of anti-surveillance legislation, looking at federal, state, and local laws that partially regulate facial recognition. We also look at several potential policies that could help regulate facial recognition in the realm of housing, or prevent petty lease violations from being used as grounds for eviction. We conclude by offering organizing tools and strategies for resisting, refusing, and thwarting the implementation of landlord tech in one’s home.

Landlord Tech Watch

This emerges through collaboration with the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, the AI Now Institute, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Alliance in Brooklyn. Together, and with [people.power.media], we designed Landlord Tech Watch—a website dedicated to making popular educational materials about the landlord tech industry and its harms. On the site, we define and expose the systems, platforms, hardware, software, algorithms, and data collection that landlords and property managers use to automate landlordism.

Anti-Eviction Lab

Since writing this report, Erin McElroy has formed the Anti-Eviction Lab at UT Austin, which now houses Landlord Tech Watch, and which brings undergraduate and graduate students together to study new and old technologies that automate evictions and gentrification. McElroy is currently working with Noah Cohen, Andrew Liguana, Lulia Liu Pan, Alyssa Ramirez, Ashley Xu, and Catherine Xu. More can be found at: <https://www.antievictionlab.org>.